

Congressman Steny Hoyer, the House Majority Leader, outlined the 2010 Congressional agenda in a speech at the National Press Club. In his speech, he walked through continuing efforts to create jobs and grow the economy, and he laid out a strategy for reducing the deficit, including approving a strong pay-as-you-go law that will require government to exercise fiscal constraint.

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Text as prepared for delivery:

“When President Obama spoke to the Democratic Caucus this month, he took a moment to remind each of us how and why we were called to public service: ‘We were willing to stand up in the public square, risk loss, risk embarrassment, because we knew in our hearts that something wasn’t right.’ Frustration is part of public service, whenever we see that the ideals we hold to be true are not within reach of our communities. Our test is whether we can turn our frustration into something constructive—whether we can be passionately positive.

“And that is especially the case in 2010, as Congress begins a new session and as we gather to hear the State of the Union address. This is a time of economic pain for millions of Americans, and fear for their families’ future; and in 2010, many expect that economic pain to be translated into political pain for Democrats, the incumbent party. That’s what we saw in Massachusetts. If Democrats didn’t share America’s economic urgency, we would deserve to lose more seats.

“But when I look at the members of our Caucus, I see that urgency every day; and it only grows when we reflect on why we are here in the first place. As we took our oaths a year ago, we knew that things weren’t right in America. We saw it in the lives of the millions of Americans out of work; in the families forced to leave their homes; in the elderly doubting the security of their retirements after lives of hard work. We saw it in small businesses laying off workers in the face of falling sales and rising health care costs.

“We knew that things weren’t right when our middle class has been running just to stand still for nearly a decade. And we knew that something wasn’t right in a political culture that thrived for too long on easy choices; on the philosophy of ‘deficits don’t matter’; on entitlements, wars, and tax cuts for the privileged, all paid for with borrowed cash to be paid back by our children. For six years, our Republican colleagues had an unprecedented chance to put their ideology into law. And they drove our economy into a ditch.

“That failure is a fact, and we have to learn from it if we want to do better. But placing blame is not the point, because America’s recovery is our responsibility—the shared responsibility of both parties, and the test on which we should be judged. Democrats have accepted it; Republicans should, too.

“We accepted responsibility when, weeks into President Obama’s term we passed the Recovery Act: a plan supported by economists across the spectrum, premised on the idea that when consumers and businesses are justifiably afraid to spend in a recession, government has to pick up the slack. The Recovery Act passed without a single Republican vote, just as President Clinton’s 1993 economic policy did—the same policy that helped lead to the best economy we have seen in 50 years. As they did in 1993, the minority essentially bet on the failure of our economy. As the Recovery Act was being debated, campaign chairman Pete Sessions told his party: Republicans ‘need to get over the idea that they’re participating in legislation.’

“Despite a year of Republican efforts to paint the Recovery Act as unsuccessful, many conservative economists agree that it has grown our economy and saved and created jobs: John H. Malkin of the American Enterprise Institute recently concluded that the Recovery Act helped add ‘about 4 percentage points to U.S. growth’ during the second half of 2009.

“According to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office, the Recovery Act is already responsible for as many as 2.4 million jobs. It has seen job losses decrease from more than two million during the last three months of the Bush administration to 200,000 in the last quarter of last year. It ensured that teachers, firefighters, and police officers would stay on the job across America, educating our children, protecting our homes, and keeping our streets safe. It has cut taxes for 95% of working families, made loans to nearly 40,000 small businesses, and funded over 11,500 transportation construction projects. And thanks largely to the Recovery Act, our economy grew by 2.2% in the last fiscal quarter, its fastest rate in two years; in the first quarter of 2009, by contrast, our economy shrank by 6.4%. Unfortunately, many of my Republican colleagues, either out of ignorance or with intent, ignore those improvements.

“We’ve seen progress—but still not success. Democrats recognize that those results are not good enough, particularly if you’re one of the millions of Americans left jobless by the recession. That’s why creating jobs has been at the heart of our past year’s work—which helped make the 111th Congress one of the most productive in American history, according to Congressional Quarterly. Democrats helped students and businesses access credit for education and job creation, stopped credit card companies’ exploitations of their customers, extended unemployment insurance, and helped families keep their homes.

“In 2010, our efforts will be even more focused and vigorous, with both job creation and long-term deficit reductions as our most important priorities.

“That’s why the House passed the Jobs for Main Street Act to invest in job-creating infrastructure projects, increase the availability of loans to small businesses, and increase emergency aid for families that continue to struggle with long-term joblessness, which is not only essential to those who are making a good-faith effort to find work, but a direct spark to local economies. And the bill will help us build roads, lay tracks, upgrade water systems, and more—some of the best ways to create good-paying jobs.

“It is crucial to get a jobs bill to the President’s desk as soon as possible, and to continue to search out the most innovative ideas from economists, small businesses, and communities to create jobs and strengthen the middle class—including those initiatives just laid out by the White House’s Middle Class Task Force.

“Creating jobs is priority number one. At the same time, however, we must deal effectively with our exploding debt. In the last administration, fiscal denial turned a massive surplus into record deficits; on today’s right, fiscal denial decries the deficit while pleading for more debt-financed tax cuts. Meanwhile, the country is rightfully worried that Washington is spending too much

money. Democrats get it, and we will do something about it.

“Our country faces hard choices that can no longer be put off—so we are working to pass strong pay-as-you-go legislation, because the pledge to pay for what we buy is a proven deficit-reducer. For the same reason, President Obama has announced a freeze of non-security discretionary spending, which will require us to choose our top priorities for funding and work even harder to eliminate wasteful spending.

“But that will not be nearly enough. The single greatest contributor to our deficit is the growing cost of our entitlement programs, which is why I’m eager to work with a bipartisan commission to tackle our long-term budgetary challenges. Even if it is ultimately created by executive order, the leadership in Congress has pledged to bring up its recommendations for an up-or-down vote. If Republicans are as concerned about the deficit as they say, I hope they’ll participate and contribute their ideas on how to achieve fiscal balance—instead of sitting the process out, as they are threatening.

“Some may argue that creating jobs and reducing the deficit are contradictory goals. But in truth, unemployment and a slow economy are among the most powerful drivers of our deficit. We cannot get our budget under control until Americans are back at work, and our economy is consistently growing again.

“As I have said, the economy was also the focus in 2009, from the Recovery Act to the long, open debate on health insurance reform. Health reform has not been a distraction from these hard economic times—in fact, times like these show how vitally it is needed. With the ability to bring assurance of coverage and lower costs to working American families, and to create some 4 million jobs over the next decade, reform is a powerful response to economic insecurity. Which of us hasn’t heard of a business unable to create a needed job because of health care costs?

“That’s why Democrats are taking time to find the best way of making reform a reality. As I see it, we have four options. The first is to not pass a bill. The second is to try to pass a smaller bill that will make some very modest improvements for Americans—assuming that Republicans want to work with us. The third is for the House to pass the Senate’s bill as-is. And the fourth is for the House to pass the Senate bill and both chambers to pass a fixes bill to bridge their differences on issues such as affordability and funding. All of these choices have pluses and minuses. Democratic leaders are taking time to talk to our Members about what they are hearing from their constituents, and to digest with some clarity the messages that voters in Massachusetts were sending. “So there are no easy choices. But the objective of accessible, affordable, quality health care remains. It remains because every presidential candidate in 2008, from both parties, identified a health care crisis that is squeezing the middle class, and a status quo that cannot be sustained. It remains because Social Security and Medicare and Medicaid were all attacked in their own time as the end of the American way of life—and are now a cherished part of our social compact. And it remains because in Massachusetts, the state that has already adopted a similar health care program, not even the Republican Senate candidate—who voted for the state plan—would speak against it.

“This year, we will also work hard to enact legislation to build our energy independence and create clean-energy jobs.

“And we will push for final passage of Wall Street reform to bring accountability back to our financial sector. That bill will protect Americans from some of the most abusive practices that led up to the economic crisis, keep taxpayers off the hook for future bailouts to ‘to-big-to-fail’

firms, and safeguard our entire economy from another collapse brought on by Wall Street's most reckless gamblers.

"Energy legislation and regulatory reform are both powerful actions on behalf of the middle class. It goes without saying that, if the majority ruled in the Senate, America would be closer to energy independence, and the rules for Wall Street would be clearer, more definite, and tougher. But we know that the majority does not rule: in the last two Congresses, Republican minorities have broken all-time records for abuse of the filibuster, turning the Senate from George Washington's cooling saucer into the place where solutions to our nation's most pressing problems are put into a deep freeze.

"Under the current rules, taking a posture of permanent obstruction is the Republicans' right. But this fall, we will challenge them to stand up, own their record, and offer something more than opposition.

"But in 2010, Republicans, by their own admission, will offer a steady diet of negativity. As Politico reports, Republicans 'will attack Democrats relentlessly....Internally, Republicans call it the '80-20 strategy,' which, loosely interpreted, means spending 80 percent of the time whacking Democrats and the remainder talking up their own ideas.'

"Unfortunately, in this political environment, constructive Republicans are a minority of a minority. In fact, my State of Maryland is mourning the death of one such leader—Senator Charles 'Mac' Mathias, who, while a loyal Republican, was committed to bipartisanship and constructive solutions.

"Finally, as we tackle our challenges at home, we must continue our vigilance against threats from abroad. The failed attack on Christmas Day reminded us of the persistence of America's enemies, and President Obama was right to demand greater accountability and cooperation from our intelligence services as a result. In Afghanistan, President Obama set in motion a troop increase intended to prevent that nation from reverting to a terrorist haven. And in Iraq, December was the first month without American combat deaths since the war began, a hopeful sign as the United States prepares to withdraw combat forces this year. As we speak, American troops are risking their lives around the world, and our terrorist enemies are working hard to undermine our defenses; but the president's thoughtful decision-making process and efforts to rebuild relationships with our allies are signs of a wise foreign policy at work.

"In closing, we know that this is a time of real anger in America. For those of us who weren't alive for the Great Depression, these are the hardest times we've ever seen. And the size of our hardship is the size of our test. For those of us called to govern, the test is this: will we profit from anger and seek power for its own sake? Or can we show the people who sent us here a hope worth fighting for—a country creating jobs once more; a prosperity that's truly and deeply shared; a Congress not afraid to look our fiscal future in the face and protect generations to come from irresponsible policies; a country that holds Wall Street interests to account, that no longer ties wealth to health; a country that's building again?

"It's a test America has seen before. And history can give us this much comfort: America has never failed it."